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AUTHOR Dickson, Mary B.
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ABSTRACT

This brief paper summarizes requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 related to employment of people who are blind or visually impaired. Topics addressed include what is meant by blindness or visual impairment; examples of types of jobs that people who are blind can do; possible accommodations for the person who is blind or visually impaired during the employee selection process (such as allowing the applicant to choose how to fill out the job application); enhancing productivity on the job (both low tech and high tech accommodations are suggested); and tips for on-the-job training, performance management, training, and promotion. A list of six resources is provided. (DB)

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Working Effectively with People Who are Blind or Visually Impaired

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What is Blindness or Visual Impairment?

When we think of "blind," we think of total darkness. However, a person may be "legally blind" with either...

- 20/200 vision in both eyes with best correction in the better eye, OR
- a field of vision restricted to 20° or less.

A person whose vision is 20/70 to 20/200 is often referred to as "visually impaired."

Some people are born with no vision or significantly reduced vision. Others lose vision due to accidents or the natural aging process, usually starting in the 40's. For some, vision loss is sudden, while for others, it may be gradual. Some conditions, diabetes, for example, cause vision to fluctuate from day to day.

Many people who have lost significant levels of visual functioning take time out from their careers to learn alternative skills which allow them to live and work effectively.

If a person who is blind or visually impaired applies for a job in your company, the resume and application will indicate experience and skills.

What Types of Jobs Do People Who are Blind Do?

With appropriate training and equipment, people who are blind or visually impaired have the same range of abilities as anyone else. There are no "jobs for blind people." To broaden your thinking, consider that blind people have been successful as ...

- artists
- auto mechanics
- boat builders
- computer programmers
- fashion models
- professional story tellers
- word processing specialists
- machinists
- masseuses
- mayors
- lawyers
- musicians
- production workers
- teachers

An employer's perception of inability is often the biggest limitation that people who are blind face.

Accommodating the Person who is Blind or Visually Impaired During the Employee Selection Process

You are trying to determine whether an applicant has the necessary skills, experience, education, or other background to successfully perform the essential functions of the job. This is the same information you need about any applicant to help you make an effective hiring decision.

A person who does not see well enough to read an application form may be discouraged from applying for a job, even if the job itself requires minimal vision.

Ask the applicant how he or she would prefer to meet the requirements of the process. For example, if you require applicants to complete an application form, ask the applicant which would be most convenient...

- Mail the application to the candidate who requests it
- Offer the walk-in applicant an opportunity to take the form, have someone help complete it, and return it by mail or in person
- Offer the services of someone in the office to assist in completing the form.

When you invite a person who is blind or visually impaired to an interview...

- Ask if he or she needs directions if someone is driving
- If the candidate is taking public transportation, indicate which stop is closest, then give directions from the stop.
- Offer assistance from the reception area to your office by asking, "Would you like to take my arm?" If the person needs to, he or she will lightly grasp your arm just above your elbow and will follow one step behind you. Don't insist on helping, and certainly,

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don't push the person ahead of you. If the person uses a dog guide, the dog will follow you. Do not pet or distract the dog.

- When you get to your office, place the person's hand on the back of the chair you are offering. Do not push the person into a chair.

When a blind or visually impaired person is in your office...

- Be yourself. Use normal language. It's OK to say:
  - "Do you see what I mean?"
  - "Would you like to take a look at the work area?"
  - "I hope to see you again."

Enhancing Productivity on the Job

Velcro fasteners on protective clothing, hand trucks, and word processors allow us to do things that would otherwise be difficult. These tools enhance our productivity by reasonably accommodating our humanness.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires us to "reasonably accommodate" the limitations imposed by a person's physical or mental disability. Reasonable accommodation is defined as modification or adjustment of a job, employment practice, or the work environment that makes it possible for a qualified person with a disability to be employed. The employer needs to accommodate from the first contact with the person with the disability, during the application process, on the job, in training, on the work site, and when considering promotions and layoffs. If job duties change, new accommodations may need to be made. The ADA requires an employer to accommodate unless doing so would cause an undue hardship. If an employer finds that the cost of an accommodation would impose an undue hardship and no funding is available from another source, an applicant or employee with a disability should be offered the option of paying for the portion of the cost that constitutes an undue hardship, or of providing the accommodation. If we think of accommodations as "productivity enhancements" similar to others in the workplace, they become part of the cost of doing business.

Types of Productivity Enhancers

The employer and employee should brainstorm and research equipment or job restructuring. The person who requests accommodation has lived, and perhaps worked, with the disability and may know what will enable him or her to perform the essential functions of the job most effectively.

Low tech

Reasonable accommodations do not have to be fancy or expensive.

- Dot of silicon on a knob, switch, or button permits a person to align controls on a machine.
- Wide felt-tip marker may make file folder labels readable.
- Braille labels on the soft drink machine gives the braille user equal access to flavor choice.
- Different size strips of masking tape identify parts bins for production employees.

Consult your employee who is blind or has low vision for other simple solutions.

An employer's perception of inability is often the biggest limitation that people who are blind face.

High tech

Computers can be modified to provide enlarged screen display, synthesized voice, or braille output.

- **Optical scanners**, also known as "reading machines," scan printed material and "read it" into a computer or voice synthesizer. Some scanners require only adding a card and an external monitor.
- **Screen text enlargers** use software to enlarge print on a computer screen up to several inches high.
- **A tactile representation board** allows a person with vision loss to touch a tablet and a synthesized voice reads the word that is at the corresponding point on the screen.

At present, most advanced computer access technology is for DOS-based applications. However, first-generation graphical user interface access shows great promise.

Costs vary considerably, depending on whether the employee can benefit most from text enlargement, voice, or braille output. Software for text enlargement runs around $500-600, braille printers cost between $2,000-5,000. Speech output devices range widely, depending on sophistication, from $800-1,800. Braille scanners and printers run from $500 - 15,000.

Machines which magnify printed materials (closed circuit televisions) permit a person who has some usable vision to read memos and books and fill out forms. They cost around $2,500.

When considering costs of accommodations, review the cost of the company's entire computer system overall, the "overall financial resources of the facility..." and the "overall financial resources of the covered entity...." before deciding that the equipment needed to accommodate a blind worker is too expensive. Appropriately setting up any employee's work station helps guarantee maximum productivity.

Tips for On-The-Job Training

Employees who are blind or visually impaired need the same introduction to a job and initial training as sighted colleagues. Provide orientation to the company and the job. Ask the employee whether he or she learns best from verbal instruction or a combination of hands-on, written, and verbal learning.

Allow the person to organize the work area for greatest efficiency, even if it means organizing it differently than in the past. You may find that the new design would make other employees more productive as well.

Make sure that the work station is adequately equipped and that the employee knows where to get replacement supplies. If an outside organization has provided equipment, determine who is responsible for ownership, upkeep, upgrading, or replacement of the equipment.

Performance Management

A supervisor's responsibility is to establish an atmosphere of quality and productivity. Appropriate on-going training of all employees is crucial. Assume that an employee who is blind or visually impaired has the same career aspirations as other employees and provide training, ensuring that materials are accessible to the person's visual limitations.

Supervise as you would for any other employee. Be sure that all employees understand performance expectations. Provide praise and constructive feedback. If a performance problem arises, deal with it openly. Do not automatically assume that it is disability-related. Do not avoid giving feedback. Employees who are blind or visually impaired, as all employees, want to know when they are performing well and when they need to do things differently. Occasionally, a supervisor will not provide feedback until a major problem arises, then dismiss the employee. No employee should be surprised with such actions!

Conduct performance appraisals, using the same criteria as with other employees. If a supervisor has provided feedback throughout the year, an annual performance appraisal should contain no surprises. Review any adaptive equipment to ensure that it is still working well. Determine if it needs upgrading to keep the employee competitive.

Training and Promotion

As an employee grows in the job, provide the same opportunities for learning and taking on new challenges as for other employees. If this means attending out-of-town training, speaking at professional conferences, or training new workers, encourage these activities. Check with the employee to identify any needed accommodations.

Assist the person to plan the next steps in a successful career. Promote qualified people who are blind or visually impaired using the same criteria as promotion for others.

Resources

There are a number of resources that can assist employers and people who are blind or visually impaired with job adaptation. Begin all discussion of accommodation with the employee. If additional information is needed, consult the following organizations:

ADA Regional Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center Hotline - (800) 949-4232 (Voice/TTY).

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1801 L Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20507, 800-669-4000 (Voice) to reach EEOC field offices; for publications call (800) 800-3302 or (800)-669-EEOC (voice/TTY).

Services (or Commission) for the Blind (look in local telephone book under state agencies or vocational rehabilitation). Some of these agencies have technology centers where employers can view adaptive equipment.

Vocational Rehabilitation Division (in states that do not have a separate agency for blind people).

American Foundation for the Blind, National Technology Center, 15 West 16th Street, New York, NY 10011, (212) 620-2080 (Mon-Fri, 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM). The Center has a database of 1,200 blind and visually impaired people who use adaptive equipment in various jobs. Employers are welcome to call for information. The Center also evaluates high-tech products.

Job Accommodation Network (JAN). Call 1-800-526-7234. Employers talk with Human Factors Consultants about an individual with a disability (not limited to blindness or low vision). The consultant will search JAN's database for information related to the functional requirements of the job, the functional limitations of the employee, environmental factors, etc. The search will provide information about similar situations, names and addresses of appropriate resources.

For specific computer adaptations, contact:
Apple Computer, Inc.
Office of Special Education Programs
20525 Mariani Avenue, Cupertino, CA 95014 (408) 996-1010

This publication was developed by Mary B. Dickson, President of Creative Compliance Management, a human resource consulting and training firm whose mission is to maximize human potential in the workplace. She is the author of ***Supervising Employees with Disabilities: Beyond ADA Compliance,*** *published in 1993 by Crisp Publications, Inc. For further information, write to 13629 SE Grant Court, Portland, OR 97233, or call (503) 255-9318.*

Significant assistance was provided by:
- *Pam Maxon, Employment Specialist, and Mark Nelson, Technology Specialist, Oregon Commission for the Blind, 535 SE 12th Avenue, Portland, OR 97214, (503) 731-3221.*
- *Thomas Ciesielski, consultant on blindness and low vision issues, 5225 NE Couch Street, Portland, OR 97213, (503) 236-8479.*

For further information contact:

ILR PROGRAM ON EMPLOYMENT AND DISABILITY
ILR Extension Building, Room 102
CORNELL UNIVERSITY
Ithaca, New York 14853-3901

Voice: (607) 255-7727 TTY: (607) 255-2891

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OTHER TITLES IN THIS *IMPLEMENTING THE ADA* SERIES ARE:

Working Effectively with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Working Effectively with People who are Blind or Visually Impaired

Working Effectively with Persons who have Cognitive Disabilities

Workplace Accommodations for Persons with Musculoskeletal Disorders

Working Effectively with Employees who have Sustained a Brain Injury

Employing and Accommodating Workers with Psychiatric Disabilities

Employing and Accommodating Individuals with Histories of Alcohol and Drug Abuse

Employment Considerations for People who have Diabetes

Accommodating the Allergic Employee in the Workplace

Causes of Poor Indoor Air Quality and What You Can Do About It

Working Effectively with People with Learning Disabilities

Working Effectively with Individuals who are HIV-Positive

These and other informational brochures can be accessed on the World Wide Web at:
www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped/ada

For further information about publications such as these, contact the ILR Program on Employment and Disability, Cornell University, 102 ILR Extension, Ithaca, New York 14853-3901; or at ***607/255-2906*** *(Voice),* ***607/255-2891*** *(TTY), or* ***607/255-2763*** *(Fax).*

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